

SATURDAY, JULY 8, 2006

COMMENTARY

Commissioners looking for help in how to manage growth

Gallatin County is growing. We all know it. We see it in the new residences swelling west of Bozeman. We see it in the mammoth, double-circuit transmission lines alongside Interstate 90 into Belgrade. We experience it daily in our commutes. After decades of sleepy, small, compact communities, we are now in the league of big counties with rampant growth. Regardless of how you feel about it, the "last best place" is now a place with Super Wal-Marts, mammoth second homes and many subdivisions.

If you're at all familiar with Gallatin County government, you may know some of the issues with which we struggle. Our jail is inadequate. Our schools are full. Our roads are congested. Excuse the old expression, but we are literally bursting at the seams. Gallatin County is Montana's fastest growing county and there appears to be no end to the stream of new settlers wanting to call this place home.

Last summer we commissioned a "citizen satisfaction survey" to help us gauge how effectively the business of Gallatin County government was being conducted. Regarding the business of growth management, it probably didn't surprise some of you to know county government received an "F." We received an "F," or 37 percent satisfaction rating on the issue Gallatin County residents said was the most important — managing growth.

Sixteen percent of those surveyed said the county had an effective plan to deal with growth. A sobering 84 percent of county residents surveyed disagreed. Almost 70 percent of those surveyed said countywide zoning was needed to make things right.

In Montana, county commissioners run from zoning (the "z" word) like John Colter's infamous naked run from the Blackfeet Indians. In Gallatin County, we have supported "citizen-initiated" zoning efforts such as the

Meeting schedule

Amsterdam-Churchill Bank,
July 18, 6-8 p.m.
County Courthouse, July 19, 11:30-1 p.m.
County Courthouse, July 25, 6-8 p.m.
Belgrade City Hall, July 31, 6-8 p.m.
Sedan Community Hall,
Aug. 8, 6-8 p.m.
Dry Creek Bible Church,
Aug. 15, 6-8 p.m.
Manhattan Town Hall, Aug. 16, 6-8 p.m.
Three Forks Methodist Church Annex,
Aug. 22, 6-8 p.m.

recently adopted East Gallatin, Bozeman Pass, and Reese Creek zoning districts. Gallatin County currently has 20 citizen-created zoning districts, with acreage comprising approximately half of the county's 2,500 square miles.

The problem lies in the remaining unzoned land. Minus some type of regulatory format, how does the county say

"no" to an out-of-state developer's plans for a 463-unit subdivision one mile east of the Buffalo Jump? How do we steer residential growth where residential growth makes the most sense? How can we encourage developers to do it right without jeopardizing a landowner's right to profit from his/her land or ruining our rivers, views, air and all those things we appreciate about this place?

As commissioners for Gallatin County, we have been unable to reach agreement over the best way to accomplish the job of fairly yet effectively managing growth. We know we can't stop growth but we believe it is possible to steer growth in a manner that adds needed predictability, protects the things we need to protect like our natural setting and private property rights, and offers landowners options and flexibility.

There is no one solution. Fair, equitable, and sensible land use planning is a complicated issue in any high growth

community. In Gallatin County, we believe a combination of choices: neighborhood planning for specific regions, transfer of development rights to help steer growth to the right areas, our Open Space Land Program to compensate landowners for keeping certain lands open, and some type of density regulation to add much-needed predictability to a less-than-predictable development environment. We believe we have some ideas and we are looking for your input.

Over the next two months we will be host to town meetings in a variety of Gallatin County communities. We are asking for your help on how best to manage growth in this county. These meetings will be informal, informative and we hope helpful as we put our heads together to find solutions.

Bill Murdock, Joe Skinner and John Vincent are Gallatin county's elected commissioners.